

Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on International Relations

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The Caribbean region has a rich and dynamic cultural and natural history. Members of this Subcommittee have worked to elevate awareness of the tremendous diversity in the Caribbean, and our collective appreciation of the contributions made by Caribbean-Americans. What is perhaps less well-known is the fact that the Caribbean is the tenth-largest trading partner of the United States, and an important destination for tourism and business.

Today we will take a closer look at the region, trends and challenges to U.S. policy.

Member states of the Caribbean are engaged in negotiations to open trade, integrate markets, secure energy supplies, and improve living standards, economic growth and security for their citizens. The United States, in concert with the OAS, CARICOM, Inter-American Development Bank and other multilateral groupings, is and must continue to engage and support this growth and development.

The Caribbean region appears to be making progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, but reducing HIV/AIDS transmission levels and poverty levels continues to pose particular challenges for the region. Since 2003, the Caribbean experienced stronger growth performance which is expected to moderate this year and in 2006. In this environment, with new impetus to expand trade in the region, Caribbean countries will have a window of opportunity to reduce macroeconomic vulnerabilities and advance reforms.

However, tropical storms and hurricanes have caused major setbacks in the region historically, and 2004 and 2005 have exacted enormous destruction and loss of life. There have been 21 named storms this year alone, with Tropical Storm Wilma intensifying this week and heading towards the Gulf states. A number of Caribbean nations are still reeling from the havoc caused by hurricanes last year – Grenada was especially hard hit by Hurricane Ivan.

These natural events exacerbate the economic hardship and disparities in parts of the Caribbean, where communities are finding it hard to meet their energy, nutrition, health and education needs. Economic activity, trade and investment are disrupted by these natural disasters, making it more difficult for governments in the region to tackle long-term goals such as alleviating poverty.

When we talk about poverty in this region, Haiti’s problems are compounded by political and security problems. The elections in Haiti before the end of the year are a crucial opportunity to restore law and order and to create a viable political climate to move forward in that country. The establishment of security in Haiti remains the highest priority. Additional security measures under the leadership of the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) have been deployed. Continued progress with training and support for the Haitian National Police is crucial.

Putting Haiti back on the path to democracy and prosperity is important to realizing broader hemispheric security. Haitian voters are seeking political inclusion, and moving beyond the elections they are seeking

economic and social inclusion. Just as rehabilitating Haiti's infrastructure will enable increasing commerce to and from that nation, equally important will be reconciliation and restoration of justice and the rule of law. I know this Administration, The United Nations, OAS and scores of international NGOs are working hard to help the Haitians work through the challenging times ahead.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks illustrated how Caribbean economies are dependent on the U.S. economy and major sectors of the region's economies were impacted. Since 2001, there has been a newfound awareness of the importance of striking the right balance between opening markets and protecting our borders. The Caribbean region constitutes America's "Third Border" and one which is critically important in both economic *and* security terms. There are numerous threats to security in the Caribbean — from organized crime, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, infectious disease outbreaks, and natural disasters — and all of these threats, either directly or indirectly, constitute challenges to U.S. national security.

The Caribbean countries lack resources to adequately maintain and guarantee security of their own waters. To address this, the Bush Administration has developed Operation Enduring Friendship to strengthen our national security and that of participating Caribbean nations. Operation Enduring Friendship, and the broader Third Border Initiative (TBI), provides a structured framework to enhance cooperation in the areas of counter-drugs, counterterrorism and law enforcement. Caribbean nations participating in Operation Enduring Friendship and TBI will benefit from coordinated maritime security exercises, technical assistance, standardized command, control, communications, training, and logistical support. The Administration has requested a modest \$5 million funding level for Fiscal Year 2006. I support this initiative and urge my colleagues to learn more about it and lend their support as well.

There are opportunities to strengthen intra-Caribbean commerce and trade with the United States. Our neighbors in the Caribbean should continue taking steps to upgrade security at airports and tighten security on ships and cargo destined for U.S. ports. Our government is supporting these initiatives and should continue to do so. I believe it is possible to improve the flow of goods and services without compromising our national security and that of our neighbors.

I welcome our witnesses today and look forward to hearing their perspective on the many opportunities that exist to partner with the nations of the Caribbean in these and other areas to strengthen hemispheric prosperity and security.